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France

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French Reactions to WTO Preliminary Conclusions on Ag Biotechnology

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Report Highlights:

While there was no official reaction by the GOF to the recently announced WTO interim decision on the biotech case, the national press covered the issue widely. The French biotech bill was presented to the Council of Ministers the day after the WTO ruling was released, fueling criticism by anti-biotech lobbyists. The ruling of the WTO is considered in France to present additional pressure for French policy makers to pass the biotech bill. Other pressures include significant fines levied by the EC due to France's delay in transposing EU Directives and impending national elections in 2007.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
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The French popular and agricultural press widely covered agricultural biotechnology in response to the preliminary conclusion of the WTO and the introduction of the French biotech bill (FR6008). While the WTO decision was released on February 7, the French biotech bill was presented to the French Council of Ministers on February 8.

While there was no official French government reaction to the WTO preliminary decision, environmentalists have been very vocal. Most of their approach consisted of dismissing the importance of the WTO decision. **Friends of the Earth** commented that the European Union should not respect the WTO decision since the WTO is not an international court of justice and its decisions are not based on international law. The farmers' union **Confédération Paysanne** (with whom José Bové was affiliated) said France doesn't have to comply with the WTO decision and they would rather have France pay financial sanctions than produce biotech crops. For **Greenpeace**, the recent WTO decision is a "desperate way for agrochemical companies and the USG to supply new markets with potentially dangerous GM products that nobody wants."

Another tactic of anti-biotech groups was to allege that biotech products are harmful. A full-page article was published in the daily newspaper **Le Monde** alleging a negative impact of biotech products on the health of animals raised on them. Several newspapers also published the results of a poll conducted by the French poll institute BVA for the environmentalist organization **Agir pour l'Environnement** (Action for the Environment), according to which 78 percent of the French polled support a temporary ban of GMOs to evaluate their impact on health and on the environment.

The French farm community (other than anti-biotech activists) did not officially react to the WTO interim decision. However, the largest French farmers union **FNSEA**, the young farmers' union (**Jeunes Agriculteurs**), the **Chambers of Agriculture** and the Planting Seed Industry Organization (**GNIS**) generally welcomed the presentation of the French biotech bill, hoping that when implemented it will finally provide a clear framework for experimentation and production of biotech crops in France. On the other hand, the Socialist party was in line with the anti-biotech activists and critical of the bill.

All stakeholders expect 2006 will be a difficult but important year for agricultural biotechnology in France. Discussions at the French Parliament on the biotech bill are likely to be tough and long, as Parliamentarians will be under pressure as a result of the WTO ruling, the enormous fees France will have to pay to the EU Commission if the European Directives are not transposed into national law, active environmentalists, industry and farm lobbies in favor of biotech production, and major national political deadlines (with both French Presidential and legislative elections to take place in spring 2007).